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The Verbal Vernacular: Lockwood Kipling as Curator of Folklore and Folk-Idiom

Though my focus will be on Lockwood as a student of language and popular speech, I'd like to begin with a quotation from the younger Kipling, in whose work aspects of style and quirks of description often offer suggestive insights into his influential father's cultural mores and priorities. What initially appears a typical piece of weekly reportage—an account of the Mohurram commemorations in late 1887—begins, as so many of Rudyard's articles do, in an affected tone of boredom with the commonplace wonders and odours of parochial Lahore. That is, until the jaded observer's curiosity is activated by a striking image of oral literary culture, undergirt by religious communality:

...one feature of the last night of the Mohurram cannot be overlooked. In the broader streets, surrounded by the faithful, sat Maulvis reading the story of the death of the Blessed Imams. Their mimbars were of the rudest, but the walls behind them were in most cases gay, with glass lamps, cuckoo-clocks, vile 'export' trinketry, wax flowers and kindred atrocities... but, looking at the men who listened, one forgot the surroundings. They seemed so desperately in earnest, as they rocked to and fro, and lamented. The manner of the Maulvis' preaching varied as much as their audiences. One man, austere, rugged-featured, and filthily clad, had sat down upon a shop-board in a side-alley and his small congregation were almost entirely provincial. He preached literally, as the spirit moved him, and whatever Power may have come upon him held, and shook his body. The jats made no sign. Only one small child ran up and put his hand upon the preacher's knee, unterrified by the working face and the torrent of words. Elsewhere, five massive wooden bedsteads had been piled one above the other to make a mimbar for one who read from a book. He was a strikingly handsome man, level in his speech and philosophical, it seemed, in his arguments. A dirty sheet had been thrown over the uppermost bedstead and by some sport of chance had draped itself 'into great laps and folds of sculptor's work' perfect and solid, so that the preacher looked as though he had been newly taken out of a fresco in a certain palace by the water.¹

It hardly needs saying that Lockwood's paternal influence can be detected throughout the descriptive vocabulary that his son deploys in India. The journalism, and especially the Rajputana sketches collected as *Letters of Marque*, is replete with rather showy allusions to Gautier and Ruskin. Strolling the galleries of the new Jaipur Museum, Rudyard expatiates on the 'House Beautiful' movement; while in the Treasury of Bundi he composes an imaginary oil painting animated by a brass huqa, a red carpet, and the silvery faces of the palace accountants bent over their ledgers.² In fact, all through the 1880s, and culminating in his novel *The Light that Failed*, Rudyard Kipling's artistic values are consistently articulated through painterly analogies. But Lockwood's holistic vision of Lahori culture was linguistic as well as graphic. Whatever his proficiency in everyday spoken Urdu in comparison to Rudyard's, I think we can safely assume that Lockwood was much better placed to shift his speech up a gear to the Persianate register necessary for conversing with men of breeding and intellect. More fundamentally, he was to a degree literate whereas his son, notwithstanding the short-lived ministrations of a Persian munshi, remained more or less illiterate. Thus Lockwood is capable, with not a little condescension of course, to bemoan the cultural standards of Lahore's decaying Muslim gentry—who in their race to acquire foreign scientific knowledge, he noted disapprovingly, reckoned 'a smattering of Saadi, Hafiz, Zauk, and Nizami' sufficient for a literary education.³ We should note the absence here of Omar Khayyam, and indeed of Firdausi: hardly omissions the educated reader in Britain of the time would be

¹ Rudyard Kipling, 'The City of Two Creeds', *Civil & Military Gazette*, 1 Oct 1887. Reprinted in Thomas Pinney (ed.), *Kipling's India: Uncollected Sketches, 1884-88* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), p.269.

² Rudyard Kipling, *From Sea to Sea: Letters of Travel* (2 vols; London: Macmillan, 1900), I, 24, 176.

³ T.H. Thornton and J.L. Kipling, *Lahore* (Government Civil Secretariat Press, Lahore, 1876), p.16.

likely to make, if asked to name two or three representative poets of Iran. For Lockwood understands what the real classic canon of Persian writing is—or to be more exact and more pertinent, the canon as it had been tailored by Mughal India to serve the schooling of young noblemen. And yet here we are faced with an apparent contradiction in Lockwood’s outlook, a prejudicial turn of thought that he would pass onto Rudyard, and which would manifest and ramify itself in the latter’s writing. How do we reconcile Lockwood the Persian dilettante, with the man who habitually denigrates indigenous literate culture, and who conversely valorizes the *spoken* word in all its wit, force, shifting emphasis and, to borrow a phrase from one his son’s articles, its ‘abundant wealth of expression peculiar to the East’?⁴

Those remarks on the Persian classics, for example, form merely a side-note in the very interesting guidebook to Lahore he co-authored in 1876. In contrast, this same work devotes twelve pages to ‘vernacular’ poetry, including ‘the professional *Mirásis* or *Bhátis*, a tribe of hereditary ballad singers, whose songs, ballads, and tales, recited at weddings and other festivities, are in reality the favourite literature of the day.’ ‘Reflecting the mind of the people with great fidelity’, Lockwood remarks—assuming of course this is Lockwood’s voice, and not that of his collaborator T.H. Thornton—this living bardic tradition is accorded much higher value than the Sanskrit classics that he now presumes to be wholly unread in the original.⁵ Lockwood pursued this sentiment in his magnum opus, *Beast and Man in India*. Effectively a work of social anthropology carried off with the vim of a memoir, this study of the myths, jokes, proverbs and idioms surrounding common fauna (supplemented, of course, with plentiful illustrations) is ostensibly a plea for the better treatment of domestic pets and beasts of burden. But of course Lockwood’s aims go much farther than that: ‘It has seemed to me that an elementary study of Indian animals, their treatment and usage, and the popular estimates and sayings current about them, though involving much that is commonplace and trivial, opens a side door into Indian life, thought, and character, the threshold of which is still unworn.’⁶

Beast and Man is a hefty volume, and in its original form both difficult and expensive to come by today. But the effort to obtain it, and then to delve its strata for the richer seams, is richly rewarded. If we turn to the chapter on birds, for example, we learn that crows are associated variously with the flight of dead souls, with knavery, and also with pomp and vanity. Mothers tell naughty children the crows will fly away with them, and gypsies have a trick of trapping crows and then holding them hostage before the shop of a pious bania, threatening to wring the captive’s neck unless the Hindi shopkeeper will ransom it with a few pice. Thus we have custom, old saws, debased mythology, and a street-scene, blended together in conversational culture: a conversation, by the way, which is not confined to humans, as we discover in the section ‘What birds say’.

Good Muhammadans think the black partridge pious, since its call fits itself to the words “Shobhaan teri qudrat” “Thine, O Lord, is the power”; but more worldly ears distinguish the words “Lassoon, pyaaz, adrak” “Garlic, onions, ginger”; or, according to some, “Nun, tel, adrak,”—“salt, oil, ginger,” the chief condiments of curry. The Indian ring-dove {*Turtur risorius*) is similarly endeared to Muhammadans by its pious persistence in the cry “Yusuf kua” “Joseph is in the well,” which it first raised when the wicked brethren said he was slain and showed the grieving Jacob the blood-stained coat of many colours. Another dove is thought to say “Allah! Allah!” The partridge says “Faqiri Faqiri.” A wild pigeon is thought to repeat “Haq sirr hu” “God knows the secret”; the ordinary rooster exhorts the thoughtless to remember God by crowing “Zikr’ullah! Zikr’ullah! ya ghaffar!” while the raven hoarsely cries “Char, Ghar,” as he did when he basely tried to betray Muhammad hidden in the cave of Jebel Thaur to his enemies the

⁴ Rudyard Kipling, ‘Music for the Middle-aged’, *Civil & Military Gazette*, 21 Jun 1884. Reprinted in Pinney (ed.), *Kipling’s India*, p.45.

⁵ Thornton and Kipling, *Lahore*, p.25.

⁶ John Lockwood Kipling, *Beast and Man in India: a Popular Sketch of Indian Animals in their Relations with the People* (1891; repr. London: Macmillan, 1904), p.14.

Khoreish, when the pious pigeon built her nest and the spider stretched her webs across the entrance. It is quite easy to hear these words in birds' notes when you know them and they are at least as much like the original sounds as the renderings of those scientific ornithologists who have tried to express bird music in syllables.⁷

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the folk-idiom Lockwood sets out to record is not exactly that of peasants, but of the town craftsmen whose methods he observed closely when working at the series of drawings commissioned from him by Henry Rivett-Carnac. It is no accident that when Lockwood wishes to make the point that bird-fanciers across the empire share a common pool of experience, he cites the 'Spitalfields weaver or Staffordshire potter'—who Lockwood tells us, 'if he could speak the language, would find himself quite at home' in Lahore's bird bazaar. And this link in turn moves Lockwood to make one of his sporadic reflections on the steady homogenization of metropolitan culture, the diminution of its expressive range and the abstraction of its metaphoric dimension from natural referents. London's own bird market at Seven Dials, he remarks, is a sad affair compared to even one of the smaller of its India counterparts. But more than this, the idiom bartered and thrown about among the stalls there betrays the want of zest. This is directly in line with what his son would write, many years later in 1896, in a letter to the American psychologist William James. Rudyard describes how those who lose touch with craft tradition also steadily lose the full use of their tongues—and the consequent dilemma for writers, who necessarily dwell among the Sons of Mary. As he puts it, in the course of the nineteenth century, 'We, the *bourgeoisie* [sic], became inarticulate or inept.'⁸

It must be noted that India itself is by no means excluded from this narrative of decline. Indeed, India in Lockwood's mind is already fallen, which brings us back to the issue of literate versus oral culture, classical versus vernacular language. Lockwood is perhaps not quite so severe and so ostentatiously philistine as Rudyard—we need think only of the latter's biting review of Pratap Chandra Roy's translation of that 'monstrous midden' the *Mahabharata*.⁹ Rather than the Sanskrit epics, Lockwood targets the older Vedic texts, insisting that they are altogether 'dead and done-with literature', utterly alien to the vast mass of ordinary modern-day Hindus, and really no better than a 'dead horse' which various oriental scholars are determined to flog. Henry Colebrooke (1765-1837) is the translator cited by name, though Lockwood is probably thinking chiefly of such contemporaries as Friedrich Max Müller, whose so-called 'solar myth' comes in for occasional jibes in such among his son's stories as 'The Conversion of Aurelian McGoggin'. He is also, no doubt, aiming a barb at his great rival in the Indian art world, George Birdwood, and he openly attacks Keshab Chandra Sen and Dayanand Saraswati, whose Arya Samaj movement was then attaining prominence in Punjab. All are engaged in what Lockwood calls a 'sentimental... falsification of history', by aiming to set up India's most ancient literature as its most authentic, a spurious index to national life and character.¹⁰

This leads Lockwood into very interesting, and conflicted territory. A combination of oriental scholarship and revivalist reformers are conspiring to fix India in 'a wonderful immutability', he avers, when in actuality the history of Hinduism 'is one long chronicle of protest, dissent and change.' Thus the convinced imperialist ends up by positioning himself against liberal scholars who were—at least in Müller's case—broadly sympathetic to demands for self-government, and whose reconstructions of the

⁷ Ibid., pp.25-26.

⁸ Thomas Pinney (ed.), *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling* (6 vols; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990-2004), II, 249.

⁹ Rudyard Kipling, 'The Epics of India', *Civil & Military Gazette*, 24 Aug 1886. Reprinted in Pinney (ed.), *Kipling's India*, p.175.

¹⁰ Lockwood Kipling, *Beast and Man in India*, pp.2-3, 214.

past would largely inform Vedic ‘golden age’ of nationalist discourse,¹¹ and proposing instead a reading of Indian culture founded on ‘dissent and change’.¹² It’s a very striking ideological alignment that may reawaken our sense of the complexities of colonial strategies of knowledge. For we certainly must set what appear rather modern views on Lockwood’s part within the context of Punjabi administration—an administration distinctly paternalistic in its operation, that had been early founded on the personal, charismatic rule of powerful district officers. Mastery of local idiom was a vital component of this. For evidence we need only look at those telling documents, the army handbooks that were issued to officers put in command of men who were typically grouped, regimentally, by caste or religious community.¹³ These handbooks lay great stress on linguistic competence, and more particularly a species of wit: which is to say knowledge of proverb, oath, regional folklore, and not least the ability to joke.

We should remember always that for all their unique qualities as a family of artistic collaborators, the Kiplings were not writing in a vacuum. Lockwood is drawing, for his chapters in *Beast and Man*, both on his local informants and on the findings of a community of folklore-gatherers then active in north India, both British and Indian. Undoubtedly the most familiar to Lockwood would have been his Punjab contemporary Flora Annie Steel, who first published the stories she transcribed and reinvented in the *Indian Antiquary*, before presenting them to the metropolitan audience in her 1884 *Wide-Awake Stories* and subsequent volumes. Lockwood illustrated her *Tales of the Punjab, told by the People* in 1894, a copy of which can be found in the library at Bateman’s, and the subtitle to that volume ‘told by the People’ is plainly kindred with ‘being stories of my own people’, the subtitle to Rudyard’s collection *Life’s Handicap*.

There is much on this point that could be said about Flora Annie Steel, but to retain my focus on father and son I may finish by returning to where I started: that is, with where Lockwood leaves off and Rudyard begins. In June 1884, a proposal appeared in the *Civil & Military Gazette* for scrapping the incongruous lyrics of popular songs for pianoforte, and their replacement with something better fitted to a subcontinental setting. Despite its tone of facetious pedantry (‘Come under the Punkah, Maud’ is the alluring title of one ditty), it nonetheless appealed to a broader Anglo-Indian discourse concerning the withered decadence of English society in comparison with their own vigorous lifestyle. If my counsel is followed, Rudyard wrote,

there will arise a race of virile poets, owning no allegiance to, drawing no inspiration from, Western thought, who will weave for the drawing-room of the future, songs as distinctly *sui generis* as an overland trunk or a *solah topoe* and breathing in every word the luxuriant imagery and abundant wealth of expression peculiar to the East. To ensure this, however, our children must be trained from their cradles to discard the nursery rhymes of an effete civilization.¹⁴

The article foreshadows several of what would become prime concerns for Rudyard Kipling as a poet: childhood development; the solidarity of a colonial community; and more broadly the binding together of community through shared values expressed in literature—or even better, song. And most importantly, for our purposes, is the abnormally high value placed here and persistently hereafter on what is culturally *authentic*, with this authenticity underlined, and reinforced, by verbal plenitude—that is, by a language ample and evocative enough to comprehend the many strands of community life. Here is what Rudyard means by that telling phrase I quoted earlier, the ‘abundant wealth of expression’ found

¹¹ See, for example, Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New John: John Day, 1946), pp.78, 83.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.7.

¹³ See, for example, A.E. Barstow, *Handbooks for the Indian Army: Sikhs* (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1928) or W.B. Cunningham, *Handbooks for the Indian Army: Dogras* (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1932).

¹⁴ Pinney (ed.), *Kipling’s India*, p.45.

only in Asia. Note, furthermore, that semi-serious resolution to ‘discard the nursery rhymes of an effete civilization’. The implication is that the linguistic background and general mother-wit attained by colonial children will be inherently richer, ampler, more vigorous and more true to nature than that of their British-born counterparts. India, it seems, contains the potential for just that quality which had drawn him as a schoolboy to American dialect writers like Mark Twain, Bret Harte and Joel Chandler Harris—writers who expounded localized linguistic traditions enriched by admixtures and intersecting registers, and inflected by the transactions of everyday, usually active life. It is the promise of a revitalized English, mutating under a regimen of ‘dissent and change’, and better fitted to serve the needs of a world in which, for Kipling, the surest omen of failure and decline is inarticulacy.